

promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which were in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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What Rural Church Strategy Today?

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In the work of the rural church as in any other field of endeavor if we are to press we must have a sense of mission and direction. True, our general and ultimate objectives are the creation of Christ-like personalities and the building of Christian communities. In this complex world, however, the meaning of these goals in terms of everyday conduct is not obvious nor are the goals easily realized. An effective Christian strategy is called for.

To perfect such a strategy, we must first make some appraisal of our present situation, that is, the position of the rural church in America today. Second, we need evaluate the major social changes and forces of the day in light of our ideals. Are the dominant social forces of the present promoting or serving as barriers to the creation of a more Christian rural civilization and a strong and independent church? Finally, with some understanding of the present situation, we should be better able to place our basis where the most will be gained, rather than exerting extensive effort without commensurate results.

All Is Not Well

It will be helpful if we first consider briefly the status of the rural church and some characteristics of the society of which it is a part. Radical changes have taken place in rural America in the last century and especially in the last 50 years. Improved communication and transportation, the rural community has lost its former isolation and the number of contacts both within the community and with the outside world have greatly multiplied. The rural community has also become more complex and differentiated in that the number of social and economic groupings has greatly increased and the problems that face the community have increased in number and significance.

With the commercialization of agriculture, rural society has become much more closely related to the outside world. The prosperity of the agricultural economy is increasingly dependent on an active urban market for agricultural produce and on the ability of the urban economy to utilize the excess rural population. The relative inelasticity of demand for agricultural products and the greatly increased efficiency of production, together with the high rural birth rate, has led some to designate agriculture as a "problem industry" -- one in which continuous and radical readjustments are needed if a measure of prosperity is to be insured.

In this changing society the church too is in transition. The best evidence indicates that there has been a decided decline in the number of rural churches in the

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last 25 years. This trend would not necessarily be undesirable, as the rural community has been considered by many as overchurched, were it not for the fact that the great majority of closed churches have ceased to function without any planned arrangement for uniting their members with active churches. The average size of church has increased with the closing of open-country churches and a growing proportion of all members are found in the town organizations. Even though this be true, the church still remains a neighborhood institution in many rural areas and its outreach is more limited and less inclusive than that of many other rural organizations.

In comparison with the urban situation, rural areas have a lower proportion of church members, and have churches which are smaller and less adequately financed. Rural ministers have less training, shorter tenure and lower salaries than their urban colleagues.

With respect to qualitative evidence of church strength, many observers believe that the church has less meaning for its average member today than formerly. At best the above facts on church and community would make one admit that everything is not as it should be.

Against this background of conditions and changes in church and society, certain trends should be considered more in detail. Three closely related trends, urbanization, secularization and stratification, are described. These trends, at least certain aspects of them, are from the standpoint of this paper undesirable. They are regarded as representing major barriers to the creation of a strong, independent and united rural church, ministering to the whole of life.

Urban Dominance

Urbanization is a trend with which the rural church and all of rural society must reckon. By urbanization is meant the concentration of the population in cities and their environs, and the growing dominance of urban patterns in our culture. This trend, from the standpoint of the rural church, is of course not an unmitigated evil, as it has both its desirable and undesirable aspects.

A disproportionate share of the wealth and leadership of the country is found in our cities. The urban northeast is estimated to control over 80 per cent of the money wealth of the United States, although most of the natural wealth of the nation is found in the South and West. Most types of leadership are concentrated in our cities. This includes leadership in business, industry, the communications, transportation, fine arts, education and religion. With respect to the latter type of leadership, the question might be asked: Is not the young minister much more likely to have as his goal becoming pastor of First Church in Metropolis than spending his life-time in developing the work in a town and country community?

A major factor in the growth of cities in the last 150 years has been the great increase in agricultural production per worker. Because of this, an increasing proportion of persons have been released for non-agricultural pursuits. This means that the relative importance of agriculture, the chief industry in rural society, has been and is on the decline. The farm population of the nation has decreased from three-fourths or more of the total to less than one-fifth. It is estimated that 150 years ago it took 19 farmers to feed one city person, while today 19 American farmers feed 55 native urban dwellers and 10 foreigners. Tremendous strides in mechanization and improved technology in animal and plant breeding and production have made this possible. Great increases in production were made during the war despite a decided decline in the farm population. Thus the question can be asked, How much more will the farm population decrease with improved technology -- to 10 per cent of the total, or even less?

With the decline of the number of persons engaged in agriculture and without the decentralization of industry, the rural population both proportionately and numerically

certainly decrease. One of the factors in the decline of the rural church in some areas has been the extensive migration of rural people from their home communities, leaving too many churches to be supported by the remaining population. (Of course some type of cooperative effort might have met this problem, but this approach has not been widely followed.) Thus with the city-ward migration of both leadership and membership, is an aggressive, independent rural church possible? If the urbanization trend is accepted and supported, would it not be wise for the rural church to be content to be a temporary, mission outpost of the city church?

Religion Apart from Life

Another significant trend which has greatly affected the church is that of secularization. This trend is closely related to that of urbanization and thus has progressed further in urban than in rural communities.

By secularization is meant the disappearance of religious influences in many areas of life and the separation in both thinking and acting of the religious from other activities (the "secular" or "worldly"). In other words, one's religious experiences form just one of the many segments of his life. A closely related effect of the secularizing trend is that many of the once binding rules of conduct have disappeared and as a result we have a much more rapidly changing but also a more disorganized society.

The secular outlook on life is quite in contrast to the Christian faith. Secularism is concerned only with this world. "It either denies or has no interest in affirming that human life has any meaning beyond the immediate experience of its events."¹ It lives from day to day and from year to year. It is not concerned with the question whether or not life has any ultimate meaning. Two dominant features of our secularistic philosophy are its relativism and materialism.

Secularization has thrived in a world which is growing more and more complex. Our society is not only quite complex but it lacks integration and has many conflicting parts. Of course, it is not impossible to have dominant and integrating values in a complex world but they are more difficult to create than in a simpler society.

It is inevitable that a segmentalized and unintegrated culture should produce disorganized personalities. Think, for example, of the many diverse and conflicting patterns of conduct a young person growing up in the modern world encounters.

In spite of a rapidly changing world, the rural church has maintained its traditional emphasis and thus has not provided sufficient counter-force to secularizing influences. The rural church, at an earlier time the only organized activity in many areas, in recent years had to compete with an increasing number of organizations and interests (many of them quite wholesome). In this competition, the church has all too often come out second best. True, there are probably more religious patterns present in rural life than in urban but this is largely due to the fact that rural society changes less rapidly.

Rural religion has focused attention on an authoritative Bible, on other-worldliness and on a social ethic applicable to the primary group -- to the family and to the neighborhood. But the homogeneous rural primary group is disappearing and the eternal truths of the Christian gospel must be reinterpreted so as to give guidance in facing the tremendous social problems of the present day world.

Division in Church and Community

A third major social trend, related to those above, should be mentioned, although there is not space to treat it adequately. This is the increased division in rural communities.

munities along economic and social lines, or social stratification. This trend in agricultural communities is in part a reflection of the growing proportion of tenants and farm laborers. The church in the town and country community has long been divided along denominational, nationality and racial lines. Evidence is accumulating, however, that in many places class differences are becoming the most important ones in distinguishing among the churches. The relevant question here is, Will the church merely mirror the divisiveness of society or will it overcome this division?

The growing class differences among the churches in the town and country community have been partially responsible for the condition that "the killing range of the village church is greater than its service range." That is, the "better class" members, who are frequently the leaders of the open-country church, tend more and more to go to the town church. This leaves the open-country church without leaders, it closes and a number of persons are likely to be left unchurched.

It could hardly be denied that the three major trends just described—urbanization, secularization and stratification—present formidable barriers to the development of an independent and united town and country church ministering to the whole of life. Certainly it is very unlikely that this objective will be realized if these dominant forces of our society today are passively accepted by rural churchmen. But those moved by the dynamism of the Christian Gospel and who believe that the finest in rural life sets standards for the whole of society will not passively accept defeat. Rather they will react to the social forces just described which appear to be in the ascendancy, not as insurmountable barriers but as a challenge. This is a challenge which demands that we evaluate our present strategy and make a real attempt to perfect a more effective one. Only in this way can we hope to create a more Christian rural life.

A Strategy is Developing

The rural church is developing a strategy—an approach and procedures—in order to carry on more effectively its tasks. Within the last three or four decades a distinctly rural church movement has emerged in America. This movement comprises a number of groups and projects. These include the Town and Country Committees, the Rural Fellowships, the Town and Country Institutes, the National Convocation and a growing number of publications. At the heart of the movement is the work carried on in an increasing number of town and country parishes.

Six distinguishing features of the approach or strategy of our growing rural church movement may be noted. These may be characterized as follows:

- (1) A religion related to and made to permeate the whole of life rather than being just another special interest.
- (2) Stewardship of the natural resources and equitable distribution of the fruits of the land. This is the specific application to agriculture of the above approach.
- (3) The development of leadership, program and organization particularly adapted to rural life.
- (4) The use of an experimental and objective approach, especially in the treatment of social and organizational problems.
- (5) Widespread cooperation among churches and between churches and secular agencies. Similarly, the emphasis is on community centered rather than institutionally centered programs.
- (6) The articulation of a distinctly rural life philosophy.

The above gives some indication of the notable features of our present strategy. It is highly commendable in view of the needs previously outlined. After a review of the present approach, however, it is well to ask: Where does our strategy need strengthening? What are its weakest points? Three suggestions are offered in answer to this question. The proposals, developed to some extent below, are briefly as follows:

- (1) We must make more explicit the justification for a distinctly rural church approach.
- (2) We should develop a positive philosophy and a comprehensive and integrated plan of rural living as an alternative to trends we consider undesirable.
- (3) Our particular emphasis at a given time should be, at least in part, determined by the most pressing social problems of the day.

A Distinctly Rural Church Approach

Some may well ask, Why a distinctly rural Christian strategy? Why should the city and country church have a message and a mission which differs from that of the urban church? The gospel is the same in the city as in the country, isn't it? Religious organizations which have specialized projects for various age groups, a project on evangelism, one on week-day education, etc., have asked if the adding of a program on rural work would not involve considerable duplication.

Those of us active in the rural church movement need no explicit justification for it; our experience has convinced us of its value. Lest we be, however, inclined to regard this discussion as purely academic we should remember that our work has just begun. Rural churches and their leaders are not yet aware, and certainly not convinced, of the value of our movement and its message.

An answer to the question with respect to why a distinctly rural message, is that all people are different. This point Professor Rockwell Smith develops in the first chapter of his recent book, The Church In Our Town. Rural people differ from urbanites in regard to their social contacts, values and environment. Yet this is not a necessary reason for a distinctly rural approach. Whether there is justification for the development of a rural church field depends upon what one regards as the major functions of religion. If the emphasis is predominately or wholly theological then there is little reason for a distinctly rural approach. True, some variation in techniques between city and country may be warranted but this is a minor consideration.

On the other hand, if the contribution of religion is more broadly conceived, the rural church movement may have a "raison d'etre." A vital religious experience may be perceived as a two-fold relationship--the vertical contact, man's relation with his God, and the horizontal contact, man's relation with his fellowmen. In an effective and dynamic religion these two types of contacts must be seen as two aspects of the same thing. If one overlooks the fact that personalities--souls--develop through contacts with others, his religion may become an extremely individualistic, subjective and ritualistic procedure, having little or no social fruits. Conversely, if the vertical aspect of the two-fold experience is overlooked, one's value system loses its deistic character and thus becomes humanistic or a purely secular force for social reconstruction.

It will be remembered that Jesus said the two greatest commandments were, one, to love God, and two, to love one's neighbor as one's self. As E. Stanley Jones has said "A religion that does not begin with the individual does not begin; and a religion that ends with the individual ends." The two major functions of religion have been suggested¹ as one,

to give expression to spiritual values gained from experience, revelation, etc. These are expressed in terms of religious beliefs, rituals and institutions. The theological aspect of religion is a result of this function. A second function of religion is the reconstruction of personalities and of the social world. It is in carrying out this function that a distinctly rural church strategy may be worked out.

To suggest this emphasis for a distinctly rural church strategy is not to minimize the theological aspect of religion. A vital Christianity will ever be concerned with the "eternal good of human souls as well as the temporal welfare of mankind." The two types of contacts described above are inextricably related, but for purpose of analysis and emphasis the first step in rural church strategy is to focus attention on one aspect of this two-fold experience--that of social relationships and human need. In bringing the gospel to town and country people--in making it permeate the whole of life--the religious leader must of necessity have a knowledge of the social, intellectual and physical world in which he is ministering. He must have a social and intellectual map of his community and know where and how the gospel is to be applied.

If the above is accepted it would mean that the distinctive characteristic of a rural church approach would be in terms of deeds not creeds. With this emphasis, extensive cooperative enterprises are possible. Two types of cooperation among religious groups have been tried in the past. In the first type, action has been delayed until a minimum of agreement in doctrine was established. In the second type of cooperation, agreement was sought only on the immediate task to be done. Need it be said which procedure has proved most effective? The second method is that demanded by a sound rural church strategy. This means that not only churches but all groups interested in creating a more Christian rural life--agricultural organizations, the universities, the theological seminary and others--can work together, each making his own contribution toward the realization of the common end.

A Positive Philosophy and Plan for Living

If attention is focused on social relationships and human need and how the gospel may be specifically applied, we come face to face with the social changes described above which serve as formidable barriers to an effective, independent and aggressive town and country church. Our strategy demands that we meet these conditions realistically. To do this means that the trend toward an exaggerated urbanized culture must be met by a positive rural philosophy and plan for living. Secularization must be met by an aggressive town and country church determined to make religion a part of the whole of life. Increased stratification must be met by more extensive sharing of the material as well as of the spiritual.

One weakness of the proponents of the rural way of life has been the tendency to become sentimental about the glories of yesterday. Of course, those of us from rural areas have pleasant memories of the church and community of our childhood but if nostalgic thoughts are the best that we have to offer our efforts are sure to be ineffectual. We shall have to be content to sit on the sidelines and watch the urban and secular forces of the day lead the parade. To have a chance for success we must boldly proclaim a positive philosophy and plan for living.

In creating such a philosophy and program, the relative advantages and disadvantages of the rural and urban ways of life must be objectively considered and that type of society favored which is most compatible with the Christian tradition. Certain weaknesses of urban society are its inability to replace its population because of its low birth rate, its high rates of personal and social disorganization as expressed in insanity, crime and divorce, and its exaggerated mechanistic and materialistic emphasis. On the other hand, the rural community compares unfavorably with the urban in terms of material convenience, wealth and leadership. The tendency for rural life to change more slowly than urban means then it is more likely to retain its evils as well as its virtues.

When we envisage the town and country community of tomorrow we must recognize that changes are inevitable. To return to the isolated rural neighborhood of the past is not feasible, even though it were desirable. As the proportion of workers in agriculture decreases, and without the decentralization of industry, the town and country community is almost certain to decline in relative importance. But why, it may be asked, is not the decentralization of industry both desirable and possible? Witness what has been taking place in recent years in areas of hydro-electric development in southeastern United States.

We must avoid the confusion of making "rural" synonymous with "agricultural". At the present time over one-half of the workers in rural communities are engaged in non-agricultural pursuits. With the decentralization of industry this proportion will increase appreciably.

An eminent sociologist has recently predicted the certain decline of the large cities as we know it today. The two factors which will be responsible for this decline are the rapid systems of transportation and communication, which enable population to disperse, and modern sky warfare. According to this prediction we may expect a metropolis like New York City to be spread over many times the area it now occupies. A trend in this direction is already begun for in the decade 1930-40 the suburbs of the metropolitan areas grew much more rapidly than the central cities.

Perhaps, if we but look, we can see the prospects of a new town and country community and pattern of living--one in which the best in rural life can be preserved along with the full utilization of the machine. Here is a great challenge to, and opportunity for, the town and country church. This is an opportunity to create and to provide the spiritual and philosophical basis and pattern for the new town and country community. Certainly such a task would give our movement a reason for being. All who will be engaged in creating such a community and society--the technologist and the teacher, the industrialist and the agriculturalist--will be greatly in need of the vision and dynamic which only a new religion can provide.

A number of crucial considerations and problems arise in planning and thinking of a larger and finer town and country community for tomorrow. A few of these problems may be mentioned here. One, is the preservation of the values of the primary group in terms of organic and "whole" personalities, without the characteristic provincialism and warping inhibitions. A second problem is involved in replacing our segmentalized and secular culture with a pervading and integrating religious values and controls, but still allowing for flexibility and change. Third, we must learn to use the machine to promote the good life rather than allowing it to enslave us. Fourth, there is the problem of preserving the natural environment and its values with a smaller proportion of the population in agriculture. A fifth consideration deals with ways and means of decentralizing political and economic control and at the same time maintaining reasonable efficiency and the necessary cosmopolitan world outlook.

Some Strategic Areas of Work

The third and final suggestion concerning an effective rural church strategy for the future is that we constantly study the social scene and give special emphasis at any given time to those areas of greatest social tension and human need. In addition to the overall strategy proposed above, that of developing a positive rural philosophy and plan for living, the areas of work which are regarded as strategic at the present time are suggested:

- (1) Leadership training and recruitment. This is a crucial area and our focus here has been all to the good. Without leaders motivated by the Christian gospel and with a vision of, and loyalty to the best in the town and country community our cause is lost. How to recruit, train and support (financially and otherwise) such leadership must continue to be one of our foremost concerns.

- (2) Development of an occupational ministry. This is being done in agriculture with the emphasis on stewardship of the natural resources but equal consideration should be given workers in nonagricultural pursuits.
- (3) Training for Christian home and family life. The family is the most important of all agencies in creating basic attitudes and in teaching the individual to live with his fellows. The growing amount of religious literature in this field needs orientation for use in the rural community.
- (4) Exploring the contribution that religion has to make to health. Many observers believe that the number one welfare problem in rural areas today is how more adequate health and medical care may be provided. The religious implications of an action program such as this, the minister's role, religion and mental health, and the place of the medical mission are all pertinent problems in this field.
- (5) Bringing the Christian emphasis to bear in recreation. A wholesome and constructive program in this field is one of the most promising approaches to reaching youth in rural communities. Counteracting forces to the pagan influences in present day commercialized recreation are badly needed.

These are some of the problem areas in which a rural church strategy must be developed in order to be most effective. For additional suggestions, see The Christian Mission Among Rural People, and Urgent Tasks of the Church in Town and Country, a report of the last National Convocation. The most strategic areas of work will of course vary from community to community. A social and intellectual mapping of the community is necessary in order to discover the areas of greatest tension and need for Christian reconstruction. The church acts as the conscience of the community in discovering these problems. In addition, it has an educational function and it should also supply the dynamic for action.

Here, In Part, We Find God

The above strategy suggests a different emphasis than that which has been dominant in many rural churches in the past. The rural church has been known traditionally to focus on preaching and overlook a broader program, to emphasize doctrine at the expense of a community ministry. The pulpiteer has been favored over the pastor and community leader, and attention has been on creed rather than deed. In recent years, however, denominational ties have been weakening and we are becoming more conscious of the need for new religious forms.

The most meaningful religious rituals and forms are those which are closely related to and rooted in life. Thus, getting people to work together to meet human need does not mean overlooking the "vertical" aspect of their religious experience. Witness, for example, the growing literature of worship coming out of the relatively young rural church movement. Meaningful religious experiences and rituals come out of the activity of meeting human need when properly motivated. Here, in part, we find God!